



File Code: 1950

Date: May 30, 2019

Dear planning participant,

We would like to update you on the status of the Mid-Swan Landscape Restoration and Wildland Urban Interface Project. The scoping period for public comment concluded on December 24, 2018 after receiving over 70 letters and meeting dozens of individuals at two open houses. Since then, the planning team has reviewed this valuable feedback, and is working to modify the proposed action and develop alternatives that respond to what we heard.

We have completed a document titled "Scoping Summary and Draft Issue Statements." This summarizes the comments we heard during scoping and identifies four issues that will be analyzed in the upcoming draft environmental impact statement. Many other comments we heard gave us great ideas to improve public involvement opportunities, strengthen our analysis, and better respond to the issues on the ground.

What is the Mid-Swan Project?

The Mid-Swan is a proposed landscape restoration project within approximately 274,000 acres in the Swan Valley of northwest Montana.

The purpose of the project is to restore and maintain aquatic and terrestrial biodiversity in light of climate change, and to reduce the risk from wildfire in the wildland urban interface

More information can be found on the Project's webpage:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=54853>

What is unique about this project?

Many aspects of this project make it unique; however, we would like to highlight how the planning and implementation process may set it apart from others. From its inception, and with public feedback and involvement with the Southwest Crown of the Continent Collaborative, we have learned the value of assessing issues on a landscape scale. Simply put, this project proposes actions across an area that is typically larger than past vegetation restoration projects. Scoping comments largely supported this approach, noting the benefits it will provide to biodiversity, plant and animal species, and socioeconomic factors.

Because the project area is relatively large, determining what ecological needs for every acre on the ground can be time consuming and expensive, not to mention, could change at any moment with a large disturbance event. Employing certain assessment techniques (such as the photo interpretation process used in this project) can accurately reflect the landscape needs over a large area and roughly show what treatments are needed to move conditions to desired objectives. This approach is accurate; however, verifying on-the-ground conditions, and, if need be, modifying the proposed action, is an important element of the planning process. This concept is called "conditions-based planning" and has been adopted by other landscape restoration plans and largely supported in public comment.

More on conditions-based planning

Conditions-based planning increases flexibility for implementation and can ultimately result in a higher rate of achieving objectives. To do this, we will develop an implementation guide to accompany the environmental impact statement. These two documents will work in tandem to describe alternatives, disclose effects, and show possible actions that can be used to achieve desired conditions. More specifically, the implementation guide will provide step-by-step decision triggers to assure consistency with the Flathead Forest Plan. We will share more about this in future field trips and open houses.



Next Steps

Please note: there will be many more opportunities for public involvement (open houses, field trips, etc.) than what is listed below. We will send more information as these events take shape.

Alternative development (Spring 2019). The planning team will continue to refine the proposed action and develop alternatives based on public comments.

Public field trip (June 27, 2019; 10am-3pm). Mark your calendars! The planning team and Swan Valley Connections will host a public field trip to the Piper Creek area. We will discuss issues identified during public scoping, the conditions-based planning concept, and answer questions from participants. Those wishing to participate **will need to arrive at the Condon Work Center at 10 a.m.** and be prepared for a day in the field. More information to follow soon.

Draft EIS and implementation guide (Fall 2019). We anticipate the DEIS and draft implementation guide to be released this fall. These documents will share the full range of alternatives we developed that respond to public comment and the purpose and need.

Public comment period (Winter 2019). Opportunity for the public to submit comments on the DEIS and implementation guide. Forty-five day minimum.

Final EIS and draft record of decision (March 2020). The revised EIS will include a detailed response to comments, and disclose any modifications made to the alternatives or analysis.

Objections (May 2020). Opportunity for the public to object to any unresolved issues.

Record of decision (June 2020).

Thank you for your interest in this project and to the many individuals and organizations who provided feedback. We hope to continue our collaborative work together as we move towards achieving restoration goals in this amazing landscape. If you have any questions about this project, please contact Rachel Feigley, Planning Team Leader, at any of the following options.

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Sincerely,



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